

Operation Silver Fox: The History of Nazi Germany's Arctic Invasion of the Soviet Union during World War II

By Charles River Editors



An advancing German column during the operation

Introduction



Vincent van Zeijst's picture of a memorial commemorating the Soviet defenders

Operation Silver Fox

In the warm predawn darkness of June 22, 1941, 3 million men waited along a front hundreds of miles long, stretching from the Baltic coast of Poland to the Balkans. Ahead of them in the darkness lay the Soviet Union, its border guarded by millions of Red Army troops echeloned deep throughout the huge spaces of Russia. This massive gathering of Wehrmacht soldiers from Adolf Hitler's Third Reich and his allied states – notably Hungary and Romania – stood poised to carry out Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's surprise attack against the country of his putative ally, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin.

Though Germany was technically Russia's ally, Stalin had no delusions that they were friends. Instead, he used this time to build up his forces for what he saw as an inevitable invasion. First, on the heels of the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, Stalin had his troops invade and reclaim the land Russia had lost in World War I. Next he turned his attention to Finland, which was only 100 miles from the newly named Leningrad. He initially tried to negotiate with the Finnish government for some sort of treaty of mutual support. When this failed he simply invaded. While the giant Russian army ultimately won, the fact that little Finland held them off for three months demonstrated how poorly organized the bigger force was.

Initially, Stalin believed he had several years to build up his army before Germany would invade, figuring it would at least take the Germans that long to conquer France and Britain. However, when France fell quickly in 1940, it seemed he might have miscalculated, so he again sent Molotov to Berlin to stall for time. Meanwhile, Hitler trained his sights on Britain, turning his attention to destroying the Royal Air Force as a prerequisite for the invasion of Britain.

The British were able to prevent a German invasion thanks to the Battle of Britain in late 1940, and Stalin knew that if he could delay an invasion through the summer of 1941, he would be safe for another year. Unfortunately for Stalin, Molotov's mission to Berlin failed and Hitler began to plan to invade Russia by May of 1941. Since military secrets are typically the hardest to keep, Stalin soon began to hear rumors of the invasion, but even when Winston Churchill contacted him in April of 1941 warning him that German troops seemed to be massing on Russia's border, Stalin remained dubious. Stalin felt even more secure in his position when the Germans failed to invade the following May.

What Stalin did not realize was that Hitler had simply over stretched himself in Yugoslavia and only planned to delay the invasion by a few weeks. Hitler aimed to destroy Stalin's Communist regime, but he also hoped to gain access to resources in Russia, particularly oil. Throughout the first half of 1941, Germany dug in to safeguard against an Allied invasion of Western Europe as it began to mobilize millions of troops to invade the Soviet Union. Stalin even refused to believe the report of a German defector who claimed that the troops were massing on the Soviet border at that very moment.

Though the attack caught Stalin utterly by surprise, the tension between the two violent, predatory states made such a clash almost inevitable. The USSR had no plans to invade Germany in 1941, but it had remained an aggressive military state infused with the savage zeal to abolish all borders into one international "workers' paradise" through force of arms, as Vladimir Lenin (and many other Soviet leaders and writers) made clear: "Bourgeois nationalism and proletarian internationalism – they are two irreconcilably hostile slogans [...] We say yes to any struggle against national oppression. For any struggle for any kind of national development, for 'national culture' in general, we say unconditionally no." (Ellis, 2015, 90).

Thus, Hitler had cast aside his uneasy, friction laden alliance with the Soviet Union, striking it while the Red Army remained debilitated by Stalin's purges of the officer corps and his destruction of mobile tank doctrine as "counterrevolutionary." In beginning the start of the fighting on the Eastern Front, the deadliest part of history's deadliest war, Operation Barbarossa would turn out to be arguably the most fateful choice of World War II.

Today, everyone remembers the most famous consequences of Hitler's choice, particularly the fighting at Leningrad and Stalingrad, but the invasion was so comprehensive that it also involved fighting in the barren lands near the Arctic Circle, bringing fierce combat to the taiga and tundra. In fact, Arctic combat occurred in both the Pacific and European theaters of the war, and in both cases the operations were related in some measure to external lines of supply to the USSR.

In the Pacific Theater, the Americans and Japanese met in the little-known but savagely contested Aleutian Islands Campaign. During this campaign IJA troops invaded North American territory for the only time in the war, setting off a months-long struggle on the remote island chain and in the frigid seas around it, culminating in a desperate tundra banzai charge in the harsh subarctic landscape of the distant north.

Meanwhile, the Wehrmacht and the Red Army also met in the boreal pine forests, bogs, and tundra of Lapland and far northern Russia during the Barbarossa campaign of 1941. Fighting separately from the other Army Groups of the Third Reich, elite German Gebirgs (mountain) division soldiers and tough, resourceful Finns clashed with relatively determined and experienced Red Army soldiers in the

forbidding terrain east of Finland's border. This campaign bore the elegant operational title of *Silberfuchs*, or "Silver Fox."

Aiming for Murmansk, a key Soviet port, or at least to sever the rail lines connecting it to points south and east, the Germans found themselves contending with the rugged, unfamiliar landscape, tough Soviet resistance, and as all too frequently occurred, the half-baked strategic meddling of Adolf Hitler, Fuhrer of the Third Reich.

The Finns, for their part, had joined the Third Reich as military but not political allies to counterbalance the looming threat of the Soviet Union. The Soviets had already attacked Finland in late 1939 to early 1940, wresting the province of Karelia from their Scandinavian neighbor. Only the dauntless martial skill of the heavily outnumbered but indomitable Finns, coupled with Stalin's shift to securing his conquests in Poland, dissuaded the Soviets from attempting a full conquest of Finland.

The Finns participated in Operation Silver Fox, albeit as a separate, independent command. The menace of the Soviets still loomed on Finland's eastern border, and the Finnish people wanted to win Karelia back in any case. Accordingly, Finn and German fought side by side, though their divergent goals contributed to Silver Fox's failure.

Operation Silver Fox: The History of Nazi Germany's Arctic Invasion of the Soviet Union during World War II chronicles one of the most unheralded aspects of Nazi Germany's invasion of the USSR. Along with pictures of important people and places, you will learn about Operation Silver Fox like never before.

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Chapter 1: Preparations for an Invasion of the USSR

Hitler likely intended to attack the Soviet Union since the beginning of his expansionism in the late 1930s. However, actual planning for Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the USSR, began only in the summer of 1940. After splitting Poland with the eastern dictatorship in 1939, Hitler's Third Reich conquered France and the Low Countries in 1940, and it was not yet known how the Battle of Britain would play out. Nonetheless, Hitler was already thinking about the conquest of the Soviet Union.

The important artillery general Erich Marcks, later killed by an Allied fighter-bomber attack in Normandy, drew up the initial plan in August 1940. This plan envisioned two army groups, Army Groups North and South, advancing into the USSR on either side of the immense Pripet Marshes, the largest obstacle in western Russia. Soon, however, the Germans scrapped this plan in favor of a more flexible arrangement with three army groups. Army Group North, under Field Marshal Ritter von Leeb, would push for Leningrad, while Army Group Center would drive for Moscow under the leadership of Field Marshal Fedor von Bock. This formation represented the largest and best-supplied portion of the Barbarossa invasion, given its centrally important task, and while both of these army groups operated north of the Pripet Marshes, to the south of the Pripet morass, the prickly Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt headed Army Group South, charged with advancing through the Ukraine, taking Kiev and the Dnieper River, and preventing Soviet counterattacks from reaching the indispensable Romanian oil fields.



Marcks



Bock

The main thrust would lie along the axis to Moscow, according to original plans. While often compared to Napoleon Bonaparte's doomed incursion into Russia in 1812, the comparison is facile and fails to correspond to historical reality. Moscow in 1812 represented a large tract of buildings with symbolic and shelter value, but nothing more, whereas in the technological world of 1941, the Russian capital stood as the pulsing nerve center of the Soviet Union's European region – a region containing most of the USSR's population, factories, and armies. Wehrmacht panzer general Heinz Guderian spoke accurately of “the geographical significance of Moscow, which was quite different from that of, say, Paris. Moscow was the great Russian road, rail, and communications centre: it was the political solar plexus: it was an important industrial area: and its capture would not only have an enormous psychological effect on the Russian people but on the whole rest of the world as well.” (Guderian, 1996, 199).

Stalin's Red Army, for all its deficiencies, represented a modern fighting force for its day, infinitely different from the Czar's armies in 1812. The Soviet armies required massive logistical support along railways in the same manner as the Germans – which is a major reason why the Wehrmacht's encircling tactics had such a devastating effect on the Red Army in 1941. Cut off from steady supply of gasoline,

diesel, ammunition, reinforcements, and food in vast quantities, the Red Army units quickly became a starving rabble on foot, with their trucks, aircraft, and tanks immobilized by lack of fuel. In fact, once they drove the Germans back west late in the war, the Soviets laid Russian-gauge railways into eastern and central Europe. Without the arteries of the railways infusing them with the varied lifeblood of war materiel, the Red Army divisions in 1944 and 1945 would have quickly halted, perhaps permanently.

As a result, control of Moscow would defeat all Soviet forces in European Russia rapidly and totally, while placing strategic and operational initiative in the Germans' hands. Moscow would provide a superb base for the winter, and the Soviet state – already loathed by most of its subjects, who understandably resented its murderous character, seizure of their property, and aggressive atheism – might well collapse. Moscow, then, represented a viable target, probably offering the key to defeating the Soviet Union in the first summer's campaign, or at least reducing it to an impotent rump state in Siberia that would likely be forced to sue for peace.

Still, the sheer size and difficult terrain of Russia presented the Wehrmacht with a vast logistical challenge, which even the Fuhrer understood. According to the war journal of Generaloberst Franz Halder of the general staff, Hitler decided to send all available anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) to support Barbarossa rather than protecting Germany proper (which would be guarded by fighter planes), indicating the Fuhrer's intention to fully commit necessary resources to the plan: “AA defense will be slightly weakened (30%) in favor of Barbarossa. [...] AAA: Fuehrer wants no serviceable piece to remain inactive. Personnel for 30 Batteries. AA Corps, of 6 [Battalions], for 6th Army ([Armored] Group 1) and [Armored] Group 2.” (Halder, , 9).

The Wehrmacht actually anticipated the logistical challenges of the USSR's large spaces with considerable clarity, including the lack of European-gauge railroads in the east. Though the army planned for an operation ending with the capture of Moscow in late summer or early autumn – thus neglecting winter gear – the quartermaster corps stockpiled large amounts of supplies for the summer campaign, assembled materials and pioneers to drive railroads rapidly into Soviet territory, and built up a pool of tens of thousands of tons (in cargo capacity) of trucks in 60-ton convoys.

The Germans moved men to the front from the start of 1941 on, though only a trickle of divisions arrived in the winter. The pace of deployment accelerated in March and exploded in April. Originally, Hitler planned to launch Operation Barbarossa in mid-May 1941. However, due to an extremely wet spring which softened vast areas of terrain and swelled several rivers in the direct path of Army Group Center's and South's advance, the Fuhrer postponed the invasion until June 22nd. The last deployment started on May 23rd, one month before the launch of the attack.

Though the Germans did their best to conceal the preparations for Barbarossa through a variety of methods, mustering a heavily (though not fully) mechanized army of 3 million men could not be concealed. News arrived at the Soviet headquarters in Moscow from a wide range of sources, yet Stalin authorized no additional preparations for a potential Third Reich attack on the Soviet Union.

The murderous, primitive paranoia of the Soviet leader goes a long way in explaining this situation. Starting in 1939 and continuing into 1940, the Soviet dictator began systematically destroying his own foreign intelligence apparatus. Suspecting treachery from men who actually put their entire effort into helping Russia with intelligence gathering, Stalin repeatedly changed the intelligence chiefs at home, each previous occupant of the office dying in NKVD torture chambers or cells. Worse, Stalin had numerous agents in Europe and elsewhere in the world recalled to the USSR. When they arrived, the NKVD arrested them, tortured bizarre confessions out of them, and shot them in their underground cells,

often after circus-like, sadistic show trials. The NKVD infiltrated death squads into Western Europe to assassinate those spies who defected rather than return to certain torture and execution.

The reason for this strange procedure lay in Stalin's conviction that anyone who visited the West would be suborned by capitalism and must therefore be a traitor and double agent. This had the effect of collapsing the Soviets' spy networks and casting their reports (actually, in most cases, highly accurate) into doubt in Stalin's mind.

Despite the purges, Soviet intelligence officers still reported the coming invasion weeks ahead of time. The leading Soviet agent in Japan, Richard Sorge, posed as an undercover German journalist and received brief but useful advance warning of Barbarossa. A newly arrived German officer, Lieutenant Colonel Erwin Scholl, confided a highly specific outline of the plan to Sorge over an elegant dinner at the Imperial Hotel, talking under cover of orchestral music played for the guests' entertainment. Sorge sent off a radio message to Moscow on June 1st: "Expected start of German-Soviet war on June 15th is based exclusively on information which Lieutenant-Colonel Scholl brought with him from Berlin, which he left on May 6 heading for Bangkok. He is taking up post of attache in Bangkok. Ott stated he could not receive information on this subject directly from Berlin, and only has Scholl's information." (Whymant, 1996, 167).



Sorge

The Soviet government had ordered Sorge to return to the USSR, but by guessing correctly that he would be arrested, tortured for a few days, and then killed, the agent offered a variety of excuses to postpone his return, and he still remained deeply loyal to Russia, if not the Soviet regime, thus supplying all the high quality information he could gather. Stalin, however, dismissed the warning. Having

described Sorge as “a shit who has set himself up with some small factories and brothels in Japan” (Whymant, 1996, 184), the dictator and his henchmen sent back a terse reply accusing Sorge of lying.

In addition to Soviet agents, Red Army commanders near the border repeatedly sounded the alarm to Stalin, attempting to prompt the Soviet leader to authorize the movement of reinforcements up to the border. Lieutenant Fyodor Arkhipenko described the Stavka (Soviet GHQ) response to signs of German war preparations: “In the spring of 1941, German reconnaissance planes constantly violated our border and conducted [...] flights over the Soviet territory and our airfield, but there were instructions not to shoot them down and not even to scare them, but only escort them to the border. Everything was done as to postpone the war, prevent the development of attempted German provocation.” (Kamenir, 2008, 69).

Additionally, since at least April 1941, the British also provided the Soviets with detailed information from their own excellent intelligent network about the impending Operation Barbarossa. The British officers providing this data to Soviets in England found themselves met with suspicious, hostile, and contemptuous questioning. Due to the earlier threat of the British to send troops to aid the Finns against the Soviet invasion of 1939-1940, and the fact that the English represented two-dimensional capitalists and thus foes in Stalin's eyes, the Soviets assumed the British and Germans worked in cahoots, actually labeling the invaluable data offered “provocation.”

The use of the word “provocation” perhaps grants insight about Stalin's reasons for stubbornly refusing to believe the burgeoning flood of intelligence pointing to an imminent massive German invasion of the USSR – a mix of paranoia, arrogance, and self-delusion. Marshal Georgi Zhukov noted that Stalin's mass liquidation of the Soviet officer corps had gutted the Red Army's fighting prowess, and that “J.V. Stalin clearly knew as well that after 1939, military units were led by commanders far from being well-versed in operational-tactical and strategic education. [...] It was also impossible to discount the moral traumas which were inflicted upon the Red Army and Navy by the massive purges.” (Kamenir, 2008, 58).



Zhukov

Leading commissar Nikita Khrushchev, the man who eventually replaced Stalin as Soviet premier, provided a final piece of the puzzle of Stalin's actions by recording in the first volume of his memoirs the abject, helpless terror that the actual invasion plunged Stalin into. His extraordinary description is either full-blown calumny, or the portrait of a man driven into paralytic terror and despair by the arrival of an event he had dreaded but managed to delude himself would never happen: "Stalin was completely crushed. His morale was shattered, and he made the following declaration: 'The war has begun. It will develop catastrophically. Lenin left us the proletarian Soviet state, but we have sh— all over it' [...] He walked out [...] and went to his dacha nearest the city. [...] When we came to his dacha [...] I could see from his face that Stalin was very frightened. I suppose that Stalin was thinking we had come there to arrest him." (Khrushchev, 2005, 304).

While knowing precisely what Stalin thought is impossible, these varied facts may reveal the dictator's motivation. Stalin knew that he had destroyed his own army's fighting power and felt profound fear that a war would start, he would be blamed for the subsequent disaster, and this would cause his downfall and execution. Accordingly, he adopted a pose of doing absolutely nothing that might trigger the Germans to attack, hoping to gain time to build more tanks and train new officers. In addition, he went about killing his own agents who warned of Barbarossa, and dismissing the British intelligence as

“provocation,” in a panicky effort to deny the possibility of his worst fears being realized even to himself.

Regardless of the exact reasons – either terrified delusion, arrogant overestimation of the Red Army's fighting capabilities, or some other cause – Stalin refused to allow the units at the border to prepare for attack. He also disallowed reinforcements even on a local level. Some commanders secretly moved a few of their rear echelon units up to the border in an effort to strengthen its defenses. They did so in secret, however, because their actions could be labeled “panic-mongering” – a type of sabotage – which could lead to anything from a simple Stavka countermanding of the order, to dismissal from their command, to outright execution.

Of course, these small preparations were far too little to counteract the steel avalanche of the Wehrmacht, which was poised to burst over the border regardless of Stalin's fears or illusions.



The borders of Europe ahead of the operation

Chapter 2: Strategic Scandinavia

Hitler showed a strong, and well-founded, strategic interest in the Scandinavian countries during World War II. The Nordic nations supplied vital war materials which the Reich itself could not furnish, at least not in sufficient quantities to match the demands of weapon foundries and tank works. For example, the steel in panzer hulls used iron ore from the mines of Sweden for the most part, though France also supplied some of the vital metal.

Even more vital, the Soviets had seized the Petsamo nickel mines from Finland when they took Karelia in 1940. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Radio in Sudbury explained the imperative strategic value of major nickel deposits to the warfare of the World War II era during a May 17th broadcast in 1943: “The ships, guns, tanks and planes that today are taking parting a victory which in our hearts makes us proud and grateful, have been lightened, strengthened or toughened by nickel mined here. And every minute of every day, the nickel produced by the men and women in our audience tonight, toughens and multiplies the sinews of war that will help spell the annihilation of the Axis forces.” (Sudol, 2008, web).

The Germans, of course, wanted nickel for precisely the same reason – to produce harder, lighter armor plate for armored vehicles, corrosion-proof components for all kinds of vehicles, aircraft parts, and a host of other uses. Their chance at victory also depended on obtaining an ample, reliable supply of the key metal. With all that in mind, the Petsamo mines represented the largest and most easily accessible source within the Third Reich’s reach. A report prepared by the German general staff before the finalization of the plans for Operation Barbarossa in 1941 noted this clearly: “As a source country for German supplies, Finland is indispensable with regard to nickel.” (Krosby, 1968, 70). Moreover, taking the Petsamo mines back from the Soviets would restrict the supply of nickel available for Soviet tank armor, aircraft components, and other vital uses.

While the Petsamo mines could deprive the Soviets of necessary resources, advancing further would also put the Germans in possession of Murmansk, a northern Russian port through which 25% of all Lend-Lease supplies to the USSR flowed over the entire course of the war. Taking Murmansk, just 60 miles from the Finnish border, appeared as an eminently possible method of helping choke off Soviet lines of supply.

Other strategic considerations weighed in favor of opening a “polar front” in the planned war on the Soviet Union. Hitler viewed Scandinavia as a shield against invasion of Germany from the north, across the Baltic, by either Soviet or English forces. Conquest of Norway and an alliance with Finland ensured Sweden’s continued neutrality and gave the Germans better control of the Baltic, and thus a relatively safe area for Kriegsmarine operations. Though the World War II German navy ultimately proved ineffective – due to its reliance on colossal but basically useless battleships and the ineffective U-boat strategy in place of a modern force of aircraft carriers – Hitler and his admirals wanted the Norwegian fjords as bases for a triumphant naval campaign which never quite materialized.

Finally, though left unspoken, the Fuhrer likely desired the support of the Finns themselves. Proving incredibly tough, skilled, and courageous, the Finnish military managed to maul the much larger Soviet forces during the Winter War of 1939-1940. Though ultimately defeated, the Finns inflicted approximately 363,000 Soviet casualties at a cost of 70,000 Finnish soldiers WIA and KIA, and they destroyed 3,543 Red Army tanks despite deploying only 32 Vickers 6-Ton Mark E light tanks and Renault FT light tanks.



A picture of Finnish ski troops during the Winter War

Given their dislike and understandable fear of the Soviet Union and their proven military effectiveness, Hitler probably wanted to enlist the tenacious Finns on his side as reinforcements for Operation Barbarossa. They had shown themselves capable of bloodying the Soviets' nose when operating independently; with the aid of the Wehrmacht, they might accomplish even more.

The Germans and Finns felt their way cautiously towards a circumscribed alliance following the end of the Winter War. In the complex politics of the time, Hitler wished to keep the Soviets out of Scandinavia, but he found himself forced to tread cautiously due to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the non-aggression pact binding Nazi Germany and the USSR together. However, mounting Scandinavian outrage over German inaction in the face of Soviet aggression – such as the seizure of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – prompted even the Norwegian leader, Vidkun Quisling (soon to be reviled as a Nazi stooge and lend his name to English lexicon as an obsequious collaborator), to visit Germany in December 1939 to remonstrate with the Fuhrer over his inaction.



Quisling

Quisling proposed that the Germans assist him with a coup to take over the Norwegian government, which the Third Reich put off for the time being. However, in spring 1940, the Wehrmacht invaded Norway. Despite British resistance and the efforts of the French Foreign Legion, the tough, highly trained German mountain troops of various Gebirgsjäger divisions fought them to a standstill, then reversed the tide of battle and took Norway by June 8th, with the Norwegian king fleeing a day earlier on June 7th.

The seizure of Norway by the Germans effectively cut the Finns off from any realistic chance of receiving help from the western Allies if the Soviets invaded them again. Only a long, deadly campaign would suffice to oust the Germans from their new Norwegian fastness, and even if the Allies attempted it and succeeded, the Soviets would take Finland long before help arrived if they chose to renew hostilities.

With the Soviets continuing to make menacing demands and build railroads to the Finnish border which could easily serve to move Red Army divisions rapidly to the front, the Finns found themselves in an unenviable position. Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, still acting as commander-in-chief of the Finnish army, stated, "I remembered Stalin's words to our delegation in the autumn of 1939 [...] 'I well understand that you wish to remain neutral, but I can assure you that it is not at all possible. The Great Powers will simply not allow it.' [...] Finland was no longer free to decide about her own fate." (Clements, 2009, 261).



Mannerheim

Finnish and German officers moved back and forth between the two countries in June and July, 1940, even though these men initially had no authorization to negotiate or even promise and simply served as low-level liaisons between the two military establishments. Each party, however, reported to their respective governments on the other's state of military readiness. At this time, Hitler and his government hesitated to ally with the Finns due to their pact with the Soviets; with the Soviets eying Finland hungrily and 400,000 people fleeing from Karelia into Finland to avoid communist rule and NKVD death squads, any sort of open friendship with the Finns could be construed as a betrayal by the Germans.

The situation changed abruptly in July 1940 when Hitler began to lay schemes for his eventual attack on the Soviet Union. As he contemplated the launch of Operation Barbarossa, the Finns came to mind as potential staunch allies in this scenario. Furthermore, I.G. Farben bought a 60% interest in the Petsamo nickel mines, a contract guaranteeing 70% of output would be sold to the Third Reich. With war against the Soviet Union looming and a key strategic metal involved, the Reich government's attitude underwent an overnight about-face.

Chapter 3: Germany Saves Finland

The Soviets began aggressive unilateral expansion in the summer of 1940, and though the Germans were busy mopping up in France and preparing for the Battle of Britain ahead of an invasion of their last formidable Western European enemy, Soviet actions reinforced Hitler's determination to strike at Stalin before the Russian dictator chose to do the same. Hitler, of course, had never intended the alliance with the USSR as permanent, given his profound anti-communism, but Stalin's actions perhaps hastened the inevitable.

Soviet agitators began to foment communist demonstrations in Helsinki during the summer. The Finns attempted to halt the revolutionary agitation of the rather ironically named Association for Peace and Friendship with the Soviet Union, a Soviet-backed arm of the communist international in Finland, leading to direct threats from Stalin's government. German intelligence indicated even more menacing preparations in the Soviet Union, as the war journal of Franz Halder described with an amusingly sarcastic footnote: "12 August 1940 [...] Russian forces reported to be alerted for operation against Finland, as of 15 Aug. [...] 14 August 1940 [...] d) Finland: Rumors about new Russian demands according to which practically the entire northern half... [sentence left unfinished] [...] 27 August 1940 [...] We are going to be ready in the north (Petsamo) when Russia attacks Finland. And the army is supposed to have everything nice and ready without ever getting any straightforward instructions." (Halder, 1950, 157-175).

Hitler responded decisively to the threat of Soviet invasion, starting on August 13th, 1940. At his express command, the 2nd and 3rd Gebirgsjäger Divisions moved from Trondheim to the neighborhood of Kirkenes, at the extreme northeastern tip of Norway, in a position to enter Finland or the Soviet Union at a moment's notice. The Germans also quickly shifted Luftwaffe assets to the area to provide support as needed.

These movements gave the Soviets pause, but the Germans had not yet completed their Finnish preparations. The personal envoy of Hermann Goering, Oberstleutnant Josef Veltjens, met Mannerheim on August 18th and made agreements whereby German forces could transit across Finnish territory, while the Germans would also supply the Finns with weapons. The Wehrmacht immediately forwarded Allied arms shipments held in Norway since its conquest as a mark of good faith.



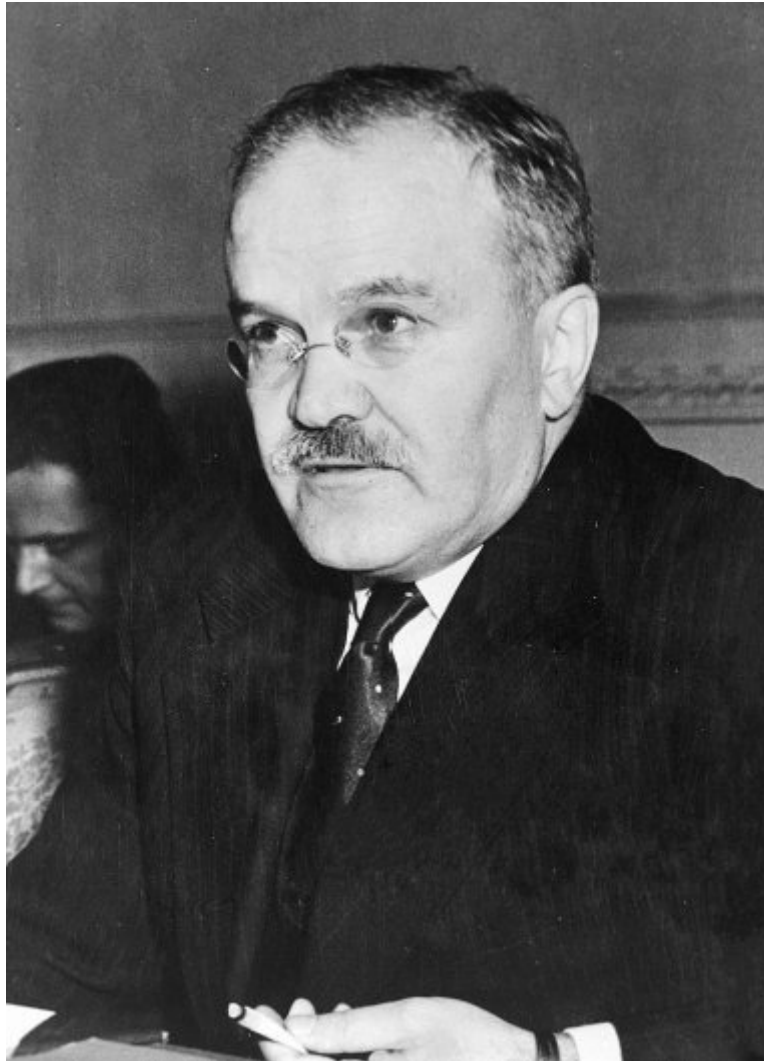
Veltjens

The transit agreements and weapons deliveries immediately halted Soviet plans to invade Finland. Mannerheim described the situation in his memoirs: “The Transit Treaty was later the subject of strong criticism, but at the time of its signing it released a sigh of relief from the whole country. [...] Later events [...] convinced me that without the evidence of German interest which the Transit Treaty implied, Finland would have become the subject of renewed aggression in the autumn of 1940, at which time she was not armed to meet it.” (Mannerheim, 1954, 400).

The agreement brought Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov hastening to Germany in November 1940, directly confronting the Führer about Finland. Hitler blandly informed the outraged Soviet minister that the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact still held, but that Germany needed Finnish nickel and lumber. Molotov, doggedly pursuing his master’s instructions, next demanded the Germans withdraw their troops from Finland. Hitler, in response, stated accurately if slightly disingenuously, “It was completely incorrect to assert that Finland was occupied by German troops. To be sure, troops were being transported to Kirkenes via Finland, of which fact Russia had been officially informed by Germany. Because of the length of the route, the trains had to stop two or three times in Finnish territory

[...] He [the Fuhrer] pointed out that both Germany and Russia would naturally be interested in not allowing the Baltic Sea to become a combat zone again.” (Sontag, 1948, 235-236).

Hitler had adroitly used a true fact – that the German troops did not, in fact, occupy Finnish territory – to pointedly remind Molotov of the Transit Agreement and its implication that Germany would defend Finland. He also inserted a veiled threat with his generalized assertions that neither party wanted the Baltic to become a “combat zone,” that the “German people” admired the courage of the Finns in the Winter War, and that they would be “annoyed” at any resumption of hostilities.



Molotov

Molotov proved not easily cowed, despite these rebuffs. The two men fenced verbally for a considerable time, but in the end, Molotov could not budge the Fuhrer. Hitler showed a sort of implacable agreeableness, in which he repeatedly affirmed his friendship for Stalin and support of Soviet interests, while “guaranteeing” that German soldiers would not appear in Finland as long as peace continued there.

The meeting between Hitler and Molotov greatly alarmed the Finns, however, and Goering once again sent Obersleutnant Veltjens to reassure them. For the rest of the time between this meeting and Operation Barbarossa, the Finns used (at Germany’s suggestion) a wide range of delaying tactics in negotiations with the Soviets. They took every step to protract the talks, arguing endlessly over one

trivial point after another, proving sticklers over minute shadings of phraseology, and generally deploying every trick in the book to keep the Soviets talking rather than invading.

For their part, the Germans performed a delicate balancing act between the Finns and the Soviets during late 1940 and into 1941. They did not let the Finns in on the secret of Barbarossa for quite some time to prevent premature leaks to the Soviets and thus loss of surprise. However, they also needed to encourage the Finns and determine how long it would take the Finnish army to mobilize its divisions and move them to the front in anticipation of the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Franz Halder brought this matter up in general terms as early as December 16th, 1940, as his war journal reveals: “16 December 1940. Finnish General Talvela with attache Horn: Outlines the political situation in his country. – Finland threatened by Communist propaganda. Summary of the military situation: Aaland – Petsamo – Salla; no long-range guns and planes. [...] I want to know how much time would be required to make quiet preparations for an offensive in the Southeast.” (Halder, 1950, 71).

The German High Command hammered out the details of Operation Silver Fox from January-March in 1941. The Germans would operate in the north of the Silver Fox theater, taking Petsamo and its nickel mines, trapping and then eliminating Soviet forces on the Kola Peninsula, and taking Murmansk and/or severing the Murmansk railroad, thus cutting the British (and later, American) route of sending supplies to the USSR.

The Finns, meanwhile, would take the Karelian Isthmus and advance on either side of Lake Ladoga. The Finns themselves later modified this plan to incorporate some moderate territorial conquests in region – an example of “mission creep” in which the original intention to simply retake what the USSR had wrested away led to a more grandiose vision of establishing a “Greater Finland,” though this remained a pipe dream of the high Finnish leadership rather than something with even temporary actuality.

Originally, this force would receive several motorized and anti-tank battalions, giving the operation extra mobility and the heavy punch of StuG III assault guns. However, Sweden’s refusal to allow the transit of these vehicles scotched this idea, and worse news followed, at least from the perspective of Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, Eduard Dietl, and Hans Feige, commanders of the German portion of Operation Silver Fox. On March 4th, 1941, the British launched a commando raid on the Lofoten Islands of Norway under the operational name Claymore. The raid aimed at destroying the Lofoten Cod Boiling Plant and its products, and it succeeded admirably. The Germans suspected nothing before the British landing craft came ashore at dawn on a crystal-clear, windless morning. As the report of Brigadier J.C. Haydon, published in the *London Gazette*’s supplement after the war, said of the nighttime approach, “[T]he many navigational lights in the neighbourhood of the Lofotens came into view. That these should have been burning at what appeared to be full brilliance was somewhat surprising but certainly gave good cause for the hope that the arrival of the force had been unheralded and that the complete effects of surprise might be obtained. Such indeed proved to be the case.” (Haydon, 1948, 3688).

At a cost of one man wounded, the British took 228 prisoners and burned 800,000 gallons of fish oil and paraffin, both destined for export to Germany to produce the high explosive component glycerine. The five accompanying destroyers sank 10 German merchant ships totaling 18,000 tons. Some Norwegians also left voluntarily on the British ships to take refuge from the occupation in England.

This commando raid did not presage an English invasion of Norway and northern Germany in support of the USSR once Barbarossa started, but Hitler’s paranoia exploded into full blossom nevertheless. He greatly reduced the number of men available for Silver Fox in order to bolster Norway’s garrison (which

did not prevent 11 more major commando raids there before the war's end). Tens of thousands of men originally assigned to the operation instead remained uselessly in Norway, along with 160 batteries of artillery, thanks to the Fuhrer's panicky overreaction.

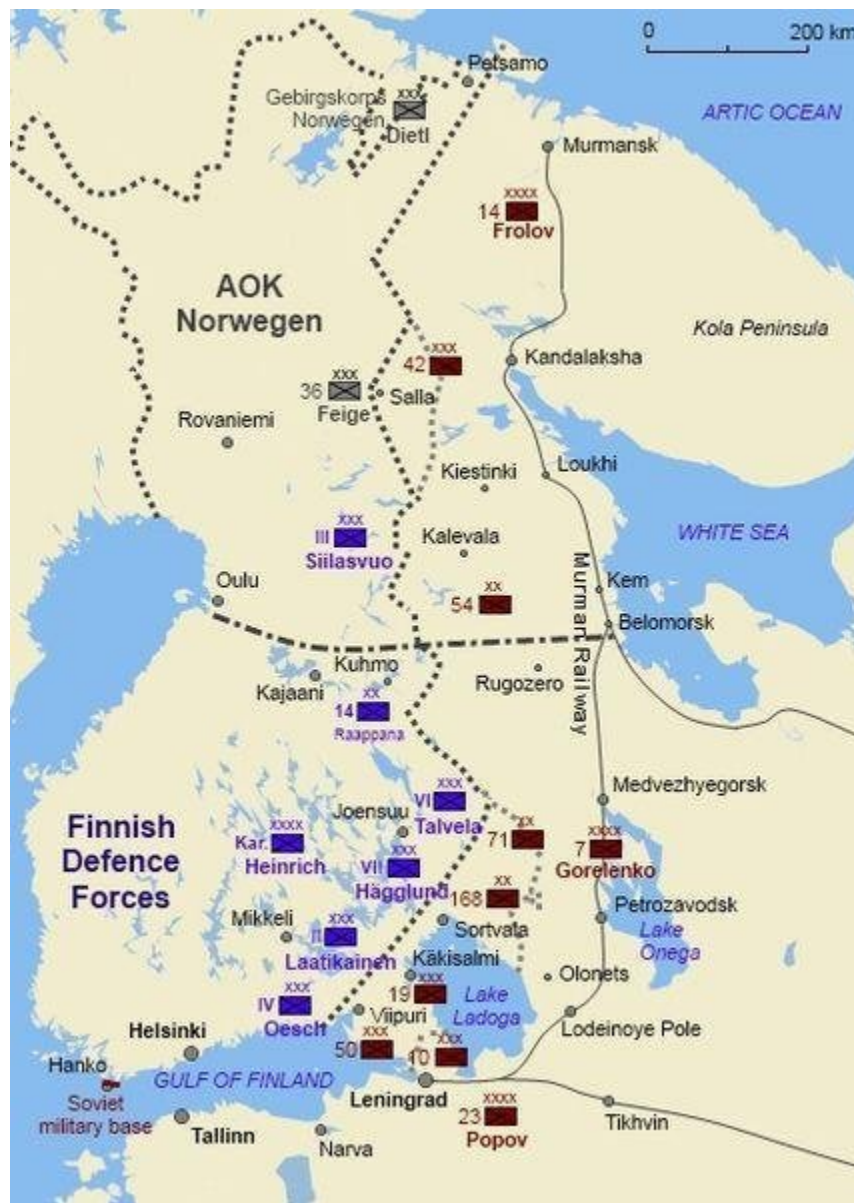


Von Falkenhorst



Dietl

Chapter 4: Operation Reindeer and Platinum Fox



Earl Ziemke's map of the lines ahead of the fighting

Operation Reindeer represented the opening move in the Barbarossa attack along the Finnish and Norwegian frontiers with the Soviet Union. Of all the Silver Fox sub-operations, Operation Reindeer took the longest to plan; the Germans started drawing up the operation as early as August 1940, just one month after Hitler made his final decision to attack the USSR.

Operation Reindeer aimed squarely at securing the Petsamo nickel mines for German exploitation. The draft operational plan cited a memorandum that “confirms the decisive importance of the Petsamo area and suggests that all measures should be taken [...] to secure the deposits for Germany [...] The development of the situation can lead to the requirement of seizing and securing Petsamo and the nickel mines at Kolosjoki with a swift stroke.” (Krosby, 1968, 71).

On June 22nd, 1941, as a vast 3-million man Wehrmacht army moved forward across the Soviet border in the predawn dark from the shores of the Baltic to the far southern grasslands of the Ukraine, the 2nd and 3rd Gebirgsjäger Divisions under Dietl launched the first stroke of Silver Fox. Operation Reindeer went off smoothly, with the Petsamo nickel mines taken into German custody without a shot being fired on June 22nd. Red Army forces observed this maneuver from a distance but did not attempt to intervene. As a result, the Petsamo mines would remain in German possession, stubbornly defended, until the last days of 1944.

With the first objective taken so easily, the Gebirgsjäger likely felt confident in the followup campaign, Operation Platinum Fox. The two divisions would push eastward just below the shores of the Arctic Ocean, the 2nd Division along the coast to Polyarniy and the 3rd Division inland towards the main objective of Murmansk, 56 miles from the Petsamo nickel mines. The advance would occur across tundra terrain, vividly described by Dietl: “The landscape up there in the tundra outside Murmansk is just as it was after the Creation. There’s not a tree, not a shrub, not a human settlement. No roads and no paths. Nothing but rock and scree. There are countless torrents, lakes and fast-flowing rivers with rapids and waterfalls.” (Lunde, 2011, 80).

The Germans indeed faced extraordinarily rough terrain, with almost no roads or even tracks, vast areas of heaped boulders, and 2,000 foot tall ridges with swampy valleys in between. Thick coniferous taiga forest lay to the south, athwart the 3rd Division’s line of march on the way to Murmansk. The average daytime temperature stood at around 50° Fahrenheit, and the summer days approached 24 hours at such latitudes, but fog frequently blew in off the Arctic Ocean, often dense enough to halt air operations.

Forced to wait for the dilatory Finns to start operations, the two Gebirgs divisions lost the element of surprise as they waited impatiently in their positions near Petsamo. The delay gave the Soviets opposing them a full week to prepare, when at last, on June 29th, Dietl’s men received the code word to attack: “Silver Fox.” The OKW issued a simple but somewhat extraordinary statement on that day: “German Gebirgsjaeger advanced towards Murmansk, across the snow-covered tundra and by the light of the midnight sun.” (Lucas, 1992, 107).

The midnight sun, in fact, shone above a dense fog which rolled in off the frigid seas to the north. This fog grounded the Germans’ Stuka dive-bomber air support, but it also provided them with unexpected assistance. The Soviets manned a line of heavily reinforced bunkers on the heights just across the border, overlooking barbed-wire entanglements. Mongolian and Siberian Red Army soldiers with a few Russian officers manned these positions, awaiting the Germans with rifles, machine guns, and mortars at the ready. The thick fog, however, enabled the Germans to move forward without drawing heavy fire even in the stark, open tundra terrain. Pioneers blasted lanes through the barbed wire and the leading units of the 2nd Gebirgsjäger moved forward at last across the Russian border. Fire from the powerful 88mm Flak cannons provided support for the mountain troops as they scrambled up the slopes.

The German troops managed to work close to the bunkers thanks to the fog, and soon the searing red glare of flamethrower fire jetted through the white murk to gush through firing slits and other apertures. Mountain troops scrambled atop the squat concrete bunkers to blow open their armored entrances with demolition charges, after which they hurled grenades into the interior. Some manhandled the 88mm guns forward to fire shells through the bunker walls at point-blank range. The Mongolians and Siberians fought back with fatalistic toughness, refusing to surrender even when threatened with flamethrowers.

The taking of the entire fortress line in the 2nd Division sector yielded no more than 100 prisoners, making clear the Soviet troops preferred to fight to the death.

At the same time, the Germans did not rely solely on a frontal assault to carry the line. Colonel Georg von Hengl led the 137th Gebirgs regiment of the 2nd Division forward through the milky vapor at 3 a.m., moving to outflank the bunker line. At 4:30 a.m. the fog abruptly lifted, leaving Hengl and his men exposed at the foot of Hill 204. The Soviets immediately opened fire on the 137th Regiment. Bullets whined and pinged everywhere, and men began to collapse to the ground, wounded or killed by the relentless fire.

Hengl and his men kept their heads and advanced quickly up Hill 204. Fighting on the slopes represented their specialty, and the men quickly killed or routed the Soviet defenders of the hill in a vicious close-range gun-battle punctuated by bayonet fights. Undaunted by continuing hails of bullets, the Gebirgsjäger pushed onward into the valley of the Titovka River with the 1st Battalion, 137th Regiment now in the lead.

Hengl led his men forward to the Titovka, a twisting, winding northern river with numerous rapids. The Germans emerged from the thick willow scrub onto the riverbank to find the road bridge still intact. The 1st Battalion streamed across the span and immediately set up a defensive perimeter, establishing a bridgehead on the east bank.



Hengl

More Gebirgsjäger followed, crossing the river on inflatable assault boats and bringing 3.7 cm PaK 36 anti tank guns with them. The lightweight, mobile PaK 36 proved utterly useless against T-34s, earning it the derisive nickname “*Heeresanklopfgerät*” or “Army door-knocker device,” but the guns provided additional firepower in the infantry battles characterizing the fight for the Titovka River line and could pierce light fortifications.



A PaK 36 during the war

Hengl's bridgehead prompted the Soviet commander to order the surviving Siberian and Mongolian troops to fall back, enabling the Germans to secure the bunker line and establish themselves on the eastern bank of the Titovka by noon on June 30th. Simultaneously, the 136th Regiment under Colonel Hake moved to clear the Rybachiy (Fisherman) Peninsula, a desolate, gnarled lobe of land jutting out into the Barents Sea. However, as the Jägers approached the narrow neck linking the Rybachiy Peninsula to the mainland, a dug-in Soviet infantry regiment supported by heavy artillery opened fire on the advancing Germans. Meanwhile, two transports and two destroyers of the Soviet Northern Fleet landed a force of marines and armed sailors to take the 136th in flank. "The sailors and the marines from the fleet were to prove a formidable force for the Jägers to reckon with, and worthy of their macabre nickname: "striped death" (from their blue and white striped sailor's shirts). [...] Hard-pressed from two directions, it took even the disciplined and tough Jägers over five hours to beat back and defeat their attackers." (Mann, 2002, 82).

The Germans not only found themselves unable to sweep the Rybachiy Peninsula, but they also had to commit additional battalions from the 136th Regiment to keep the frenzied Soviet attacks launched from there contained. As a result, by the start of July, the Germans abandoned efforts to break in the peninsula and instead setting up defensive lines across its neck, adopting a policy of containment while the main thrust tried to push for Murmansk.

The next objective after taking the line of the Titovka River lay at the Bolshoya Zapodnaya Litsa, literally "Big Western Litsa." Initially, the 3rd Gebirgsjäger Division made good progress due to vigorous Luftwaffe air support, as Stuka dive-bombers, their "Jericho trumpets" howling, dropped like hawks on the Russian defenders exposed in the tundra terrain. The Jägers of the 3rd found burned out

vehicles and corpses strewn their path of advance, the casualties brought about by the aggressive Stuka pilots.

However, beyond the Titovka, the Germans found to their horror that the roads marked on their maps did not exist; Wehrmacht planners who had been transcribing Soviet maps had mistaken the markings for telephone lines as roads. The 3rd Division pushed on briefly nevertheless through the ghastly swamps and boulders of the tundra before halting just past Chapr Lake.

At this point, Dietl abruptly changed his plans. The 3rd Gebirgsjäger received the order to fall back to the Titovka River, since Dietl deemed it impossible to supply two parallel columns in the appalling Arctic terrain. From there, one regiment fell back to the Arctic Highway inside Finland, while the others moved up the Titovka to join the 2nd Division. The two partial divisions, merged into one force, then pushed forward across 12 miles of tundra to the Litsa River bridge, some seven miles south of the Barents Sea.

The Germans planned their attack across the Litsa for the morning of July 6th, but the attack actually occurred later than this due both to enemy action and the terrain. The tundra itself slowed the 3rd Gebirgsjäger Division, while both units came under heavy Soviet artillery fire as they approached the river itself, necessitating a cautious advance. Elements of the two divisions stormed the river line late on July 6th, the 2nd Division striking north of the Litsa bridge and the 3rd Division to the south. Crossing the river in inflatable assault boats, the Germans found themselves under heavy fire from two Soviet regiments defending the eastern bank. Wounded and dead men sank to the bottom of the boats, and some craft foundered in the icy cold waters of the river.

Finally, the Gebirgsjäger rushed ashore. Fighting hard, they gradually pushed the stubborn Red Army troops back to form a bridgehead, but by nightfall, only one battalion of the 2nd and two battalions of the 3rd held positions on the eastern bank – equivalent to just one regiment. The men established a tenuous bridgehead one mile long north to south with the Litsa bridge at the center.

Not surprisingly, the Soviets didn't prove idle or reluctant either. The Soviet Northern Fleet again sent its two transports out, packed with troops, escorted by two destroyers and a cruiser. Two battalions of Soviet soldiers landed on the shores of Litsa Bay and moved south, menacing the 2nd Gebirgsjäger's left flank. Dietl threw out a battalion at right angles to the front line to protect this flank, but this reduced the number of troops available for the Litsa River crossing.

The Germans held the bridgehead on July 7th, but on the night of July 7th-8th, vigorous Soviet counterattacks hit the Jäger's forward lines. The Russians involved in the attack consisted of elements of the 52nd Infantry Division under Polkovnik G.A. Veschezerskogo. The hard-fighting Germans beat them off, but Dietl ordered the men to fall back to the west bank the following morning. He requested a division's worth of reinforcements from Führer headquarters, only to instead receive an understrength Finnish infantry regiment, the 14th.

Dietl rotated out the 2nd Division battalions guarding the Rybachiy Peninsula and deployed the Finnish 14th Regiment there instead. With these battalions freed up and a trickle of other reinforcements arriving, Dietl ordered another attack to begin on July 12th. While the 3rd Division held the western

bank around the Litsa bridge, the 2nd Division threw a full 7 battalions across the river to the north, near the village of Litsa itself. The plan called for these units to advance approximately 6 miles through a cluster of lakes, then change direction south to envelop the flank of the Soviet 52nd Infantry Division units deployed in front of the 3rd Division along the Litsa's east bank.

The seven battalions fought their way forward against tough Soviet resistance, but they found the mix of stony ruggedness and soupy swamps an even greater obstacle. The Germans pushed forward approximately two miles on July 13th. The operation slowed to a crawl on the 14th as Soviet units moved into the mountain troops' path. On the 15th, the Soviets landed more troops on the coast to the north, threatening the flank of the advance.

One battalion fought its way forward between two of the lakes, Traun and Kuyrk, but the 2nd Division now found itself in a closing trap, however. Fresh Soviet units counterattacked from the southeast and south, while the units landed on the coast advanced from the north. The Soviets on the Rybachiy Peninsula also launched simultaneous attacks against the Finns, bottling them up there.

With the situation growing more dangerous by the hour and several supply ships sunk by Russian submarines in the Barents Sea, Dietl decided to fall back behind the Litsa River on July 18th. Holding a line now approximately 30 miles long, stretching along the Litsa and the coast to the neck of the Rybachiy Peninsula, the Gebirgs units and Finns smashed several of the amphibious Soviet landing units, but nevertheless they remained under heavy pressure by constant local attacks.

The Army of Norway promised Dietl two regiments as reinforcements, while Falkenhorst remained confident the Germans could advance to Murmansk, but Dietl's communications grew more pessimistic. On July 30th the Royal Navy launched a carrier aircraft raid against Petsamo and Kirkenes, the only British strike against Finnish territory during World War II. The aircraft carriers HMS *Furious* and *Victorious* left Scapa Flow along with two cruisers and 10 destroyers and sailed north of Norway to launch their raids. The English dubbed the mission Operation E.F.

The British task force arrived undetected off Norway and launched their aircraft, all obsolete types even in 1941. HMS *Furious* sent 9 Fairey Albacore biplane torpedo bombers, 9 Fairey Swordfish biplane torpedo bombers, and 6 Fairey Fulmar monoplane dive bombers. These aircraft struck Petsamo and harbor. However, a Heinkel He 111 aircraft had already spotted the aircraft carriers and radioed warnings to all local Luftwaffe and antiaircraft units.

The aircraft from *Furious*, flying through a sunny sky, found themselves met by a storm of German flak over the harbor. Nevertheless, they pressed the attack despite the harbor proving empty of everything but two small merchantmen. The aircraft sank one of these, carrying a cargo of rum, then fired the rest of their ordnance at wooden quays or onshore oil storage. The Germans shot down two airplanes.

In the meantime, *Victorious* launched planes to attack the airfield at Kirkenes, consisting of 20 Albacores and 9 Fulmars. However, on arrival at the scene, the British pilots found the air full of German fighters, including Messerschmitt Bf 109s and 110s, plus. The Germans savaged the lumbering, outdated biplanes, shooting down 11 Albacores and 2 Fulmars, at a cost of at least two and possibly four fighters. Luckily for the English, the German squadron commander lacked aggression and did not pursue the British aircraft as they fled. Royal Navy Captain H.C. Bovell put the best face possible on the bravery of the English aircrews in his after-action report: "The enemy reconnaissance aircraft sighted

Force “P” at the most unfortunate moment, as it was too late to call off the attack and yet gave the enemy plenty of time to prepare for the arrival of the striking force. With all chance of surprise gone, and with a cloudless sky, heavy casualties were inevitable, yet the attack was pressed home with great determination and gallantry.” (Bovell, 1948, 3177).



Albacore

In fact, the English pilots showed considerable pluck, but the operation yielded nothing for the British except the deaths of their pilots and loss of aircraft. The damage proved so trivial that it even failed to alarm Hitler, who ordinarily jumped at shadows regarding British activity near Norway. This raid, however, represented England’s sole effort to assist the Soviets against the German forces during Operation Silver Fox.

With the two additional regiments released to his command, Dietl made one more attempt to advance on Murmansk, starting on September 8th. He put the newly arrived regiments in the van, since both Gebirgsjäger divisions had suffered considerable depletion and exhaustion by September, and made a fresh attack eastward. However, the Soviets destroyed both regiments almost immediately, effectively putting an entire understrength division out of action on the first day of combat. The 9th SS Regiment, a band of heavily armed civilian police despite their apparently crack unit title, attacked Hill 173, only to have the Soviets open a heavy, accurate fire on the men, littering the bare tundra with heaps of dead and wounded Germans. The rest of the 9th SS fled in terror.

The 388th Infantry Regiment pushed forward along another axis of advance. A Soviet unit lay low as the Germans passed, then attacked them in the rear as the Red Army men to the front caught them with

intense gunfire. More than 60% of the regiment, two battalions out of three, fell wounded or killed. The 388th retired, no longer able to act as an intact fighting unit.

After this fighting, the Gebirgsjäger tried to push forward and did make some territorial gains, but they could not break out beyond a new Soviet bunker line they encountered. The supply situation also reached a catastrophic state when 11 Soviet submarines operating in the Barents Sea interdicted all German seaborne resupply efforts.

On September 17th, with the first snow falling and the temperature plummeting, Dietl ordered the Mountain divisions to retreat. The 6th SS Mountain Division occupied the front while the 2nd and 3rd retired to Petsamo for rest and reorganization. From that moment until late 1944, the Germans and Russians occupied essentially fixed defensive lines, skirmishing and raiding but launching no offensives.

Operation Reindeer and Platinum Fox ended with 10,300 Germans wounded or killed, more than a third of Dietl's forces. The Germans had advanced just 22 miles in approximately 10 weeks of fighting.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-103-0043-13
Foto: Theobald | 1943

German soldiers during the fighting



German coastal artillery along the lines

Chapter 5: Operation Arctic Fox

The German plan called for launching Operation Arctic Fox simultaneously with Operation Platinum Fox. The offensive would occur to the south of Operation Platinum Fox, initially taking the Lapland town of Salla just over the post-Winter War border with the Soviet Union. Unlike the tundra campaign to the north, this operation would occur in thick pine forests, though swampy terrain existed throughout the region also.

The Germans, hailing as they did from the tamed and settled regions of Central Europe, experienced great difficulties operating in a densely forested environment. Conversely, the Finns and Soviets did not suffer from this disadvantage, and the different backgrounds of the men had a notable effect on the campaign, as Waldemar Erfurth, Wehrmacht general and liaison with the Finnish military in World War II, noted: “The endless Karelian forests had a discomfoting, indeed a downright sinister, effect upon the German soldiers, many of whom had been raised in cities. They were depressed by the apparent limitlessness of the woods. On the other hand, the Finn who had grown up in the forests did not even notice the difficulties which made life hard for the German soldiers and, moreover, always knew how to act and what to do.” (Erfurth, 1951, 2).

The German commander, General Hans Feige, commanded the XXXVI Gebirgskorps (Mountain Corps), which consisted of the 169th Infantry Division and the 6th SS Mountain Division “Nord,” plus a pair of panzer battalions – 40 and 211, two motorized artillery battalions, two engineer battalions, and some flak units, along with a Nebelwerfer multiple rocket launcher battery. His Luftwaffe air support would consist of 50 combat aircraft and 10 reconnaissance planes.



Feige

Feige's best unit consisted of the Finnish 6th Division, led by General Hjalmar Siilasvuo. The Finns knew the terrain and the enemy, and understood the tactics needed to prevail in such an environment.

The 6th SS Division Nord represented his worst unit. Already reduced by 110 men by a lethal fire aboard its transport ships, this division horrified its new commander, Obergruppenführer Karl Maria Demelhuber with its complete lack of training, professionalism, or adequate equipment: "The Division has recently been formed and in great haste [...] First impressions confirmed that the most basic requirements in individual training [...] and in combat techniques were poor and that no unit training at all has been undertaken. [...] This is no reflection on either the troops or their commanders as they have had no opportunity to carry these out." (Lucas, 1992, 115).



Demelhuber



Siilasvuo (right)

Arriving in mid-June just before the launch of Barbarossa, Demelhuber had little time to organize training for his division. Instead, despite its formidable name, the 6th SS Mountain Division represented little more than a green unit of raw recruits drawn from camp guards and police. They knew nothing of tactics, and making matters worse, the Germans had no adequate roads to move to the front, so the troops arrived at their starting points utterly exhausted by days of struggling through trackless, swampy forest filled with fallen trees and other obstacles.

Like Platinum Fox, the German command delayed the opening of Silver Fox until the Finns tardily opened their own offensive in the zone's south, leaving the men camped in conditions taxing even to the hardiest types. Feige arranged his troops with the 169th Infantry Division to the north of Salla, the two regiments of the 6th SS Nord just to the south of the town, and the Finnish 6th Division some 27 miles south. His plan envisioned the flanking forces performing an encircling movement to link up at Kayrala while the central portion of the line would push directly into the facing Soviet defenses. Eventually, the force would push east to Kandalaksha on the White Sea's Kandalaksha Gulf, then swing north to help take Murmansk.



A German tank during the operation

The Finns began the advance at 2 a.m. on July 1st. Thanks to the midnight sun, the troops moved forward with the sun shining in a clear blue sky. The thermometer stood at 80° Fahrenheit, and thick clouds of mosquitoes tormented the soldiers on both sides. The Germans opened an artillery bombardment at 2 p.m., followed by Stuka dive-bomber attacks at 4 p.m., after which the XXXVI Corps moved forward all along the line.



A picture of Finnish soldiers marching during the operation

The German commanders hoped having the afternoon sun at their backs would dazzle the Soviet defenders, but their own artillery fire and bombing had set the woods on fire in places, so the 6th SS Nord advanced through thick, choking smoke at times. The Russians met the Germans with sharp rifle fire and, in some areas, launched local counterattacks when the visible weakness of the Nord units encouraged such aggressive, proactive behavior. An Obersturmbannführer identified only as Schinke, an experienced man, rallied his troops and led a charge of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Regiment, sweeping the Soviets back to their bunker line. There a machine-gun burst ripped through his body and he fell dead, taking the fight out of his men.

A later recruit to the 6th SS Nord, Johann Voss, described second-hand some of the 6th's experiences during the assault on Salla. The account ascribes the burning of the forest to Soviet shells, but it may in fact simply have been due to the German artillery preparation and the dive-bombing attacks by the Stukas: "[H]ardly had they advanced to the foot of the hills when they were cut down by the Russian *mungrs* [i.e mortars] and machine guns blasting away from their bunkers on high ground. Our men were pinned down under the enemy's fire. In no time, the dry forest began to burn. [...] Roaring fire and smoke filled the area, mortar shells exploded and scattered machine gun fire caused more and more casualties among men and officers. Communications had collapsed. Before long, they panicked and retreated." (Voss, 2002, 86).

The 6th SS Nord Division eventually recoiled, leaving behind dead and some wounded (many of whom burned to death in the local forest fires). The despairing Karl Demelhuber visited his troops and found them in a pitiful state: "The men were physically and mentally at the end of their tether. It was clear that the demands upon them had been too great to be borne by men who were between 30 and 40 years of age. Many were showing signs of battle exhaustion. The CO of 7th Regiment's 1st Battalion, Hauptsturmführer Augsburg, then arrived, intending to take his men back into action. I directed him instead to pull back." (Lucas, 1992, 119).

To the north, the 169th Infantry Division enjoyed mixed success. The Soviets repulsed one regiment, but the other two pushed forward several miles on the first day, taking portions of the Sella-Kalya road. A seesaw battle developed on July 3rd, with the Soviets first pushing the 169th off the road again with a counterattack including light armor, then retreating in turn when the Germans rallied for a fresh assault.

On the morning of July 4th, a tremendous clamor brought Feige out of his headquarters on the Rovaniemi road, and he soon discovered the 6th SS Division Nord moving in a panicked torrent towards the rear, the men babbling about a massive Soviet tank attack coming close behind their retreating column. Feige and his staff officers spent several hours halting the rout and turning the men back towards the front, but one group of SS soldiers reached Kemijarvi, 50 miles to the rear. Here, a hysterical SS NCO told the local commander that Soviet tanks would arrive in a few minutes and urged him to demolish the bridge over the Kemi River. The commander, acting more level-headed, refused to set off demolition charges.

Subsequent investigations eventually concluded the rout occurred due to the mere sound of several tank engines starting up behind Soviet lines, but from this point on, the 6th SS played a subsidiary role in Arctic Fox due to its extreme unreliability in the face of danger. Feige wanted to withdraw it entirely and establish a training area where the experienced officers could imbue their troops with fighting spirit

and technical skill, but Hitler vetoed this plan, insisting that the 6th SS Nord be placed into combat as a punishment. At this juncture, Franz Halder sourly opined that the SS's performance "clearly shows up the dubiousness of this entire Murmansk operation, which serves only political ends and is open to the gravest censure from the Operational point of view." (Boog, 1998, 947).

The 169th Infantry Division, meanwhile, prepared to attack Salla on July 6th. The main combat team consisted of five infantry battalions supported by two panzer companies, with the other four infantry battalions providing backup. The combat team struck east to the north of Salla, then swung south in a flanking movement. Steady combat occurred as the 169th advanced, with the Soviets disputing the forested terrain vigorously.

16 Soviet tanks attacked the combat team shortly before noon as the Germans pushed close to Salla. The tank companies went into action, knocking out all 16 Red Army tanks though at the cost of heavy casualties on their side also. Plumes of black smoke from burning tanks rose over the forest as the Germans moved forward through the midday heat and constant, whining clouds of mosquitoes. The 169th finally pushed into Salla itself at 5 p.m. after intense street fighting against the Soviet 122nd Rifle Division. The Soviets counterattacked almost immediately and the 169th nearly retreated from the town. However, a personal appearance by the divisional commander, Generalleutnant Kurt Dittmar, stiffened the Germans' resolve, and they managed to hold Salla.

On July 7th, the 169th attacked the Soviet 122nd again, destroying 34 more Soviet tanks in the process, but the Germans could not manage an encirclement and the damaged Soviet division moved off towards the southeast. Feige assigned the 6th SS Nord to pursue the Soviets and keep them on the run, while the 169th Infantry Division turned east to attack towards a line of lakes between Kuola Lake and Lake Aapa. The Finnish 6th Division also drove forward towards Lake Aapa. The Germans punched through to the lake line but could not yet pass it, with the Soviet 104th Rifle Division holding the gaps between the lakes as well as the towns of Kayrala and Mikkola. This delay gave the 122nd Rifle Division the opportunity to slip behind the shelter of the lakes in order to reorganize and wait for reinforcements.

At this point, the Germans halted until they could drive roads through the forest on the left flank, a process requiring several weeks of heavy work. On July 16th, Falkenhorst arrived to find out the reason for the delay. Presented with numerous excuses, some valid and others specious, Falkenhorst remarked acidly that "XXXVI Corps cannot attack because it is 'degenerate.'" (Ziemke, 1960, 179). He also flew into a rage when he discovered the road builders sleeping in hammocks in the early afternoon. In this case, however, he was completely in the wrong. Daytime temperatures now reached 90 Fahrenheit, which, combined with intense humidity and swarms of mosquitoes, made heavy physical labor devastatingly exhausting.

Though the sun remained in the sky for 24 hours a day, it sank close to the horizon at "night," at which time the temperatures fell rapidly to a pleasant coolness. This provided excellent working weather and suppressed the mosquitoes, so the men naturally reversed their cycle to sleep at peak heat and work through the night when cool to mild temperatures prevailed. Falkenhorst evidently realized his error, or was informed of it by some officer, as a few days later he sent an awkward message saying that the troops should not pay attention to the harshness of his previous communication, as he himself labored under extreme pressure from Fuhrer HQ.

Nevertheless, Feige set a date of July 26th to resume the offensive regardless of the state of the roads by that time. The 169th Infantry Division and the Finnish 6th advanced at the north and south end of the forward lines respectively on that day. Though each advance gained a mile or two of ground, the Soviets counterattacked so heavily that by July 28th the attack stalled, still in the vicinity of the line of lakes.

By this point, the Germans had advanced some 13 miles from the starting line and suffered 25% casualties. Hitler, correctly reading the situation for once, perceived the Finnish soldiers in Arctic Fox as more successful. Accordingly, on July 31st he ordered most of the 169th Division and the 6th SS Nord withdrawn, leaving only a holding force, then redeployed to support and augment the advance of the Finnish 6th Division near Lake Aapa.

Even this maneuver required a painful effort due to the thick forest. The 169th and Finnish 6th lay only 18 miles apart on a north-south axis, but Feige deemed the terrain in between them impassible. Accordingly, the men found themselves forced to march well back into Finland, take a southward road, then follow the Finnish 6th Division's road of advance back into Soviet territory, a total march of 110 miles.

The Germans cut a new road forward from Lampela to Lake Aapa in order to bring artillery forward for the next offensive, a process which continued until August 14th. On the 19th, the day began with pouring rain and thick fog, but the Finnish 6th Division moved off through the dripping forest like a horde of phantoms, catching the Soviets completely by surprise. The Russian commanders seemingly believed the next thrust would come in the north, in the 169th Division's original sector.



A picture of a Finnish machine gun emplacement

While the flanking forces (Finns on the right, Germans on the left) made only slow initial progress, the main assault force in the center plunged forward, brushing aside the few Soviet skirmishers they encountered. The following day, the Finns and Germans finally managed a partial but significant encirclement of the Soviets facing them.

The main Finnish force deployed five battalions of infantry on and flanking the area's one good road, the Kayrala-Alakurtti Road, to the east of Nurmi Hill. This cut off the Soviets' most obvious eastward route of retreat. Simultaneously, the 169th Infantry Division circled to the north and northeast, taking the crossing of the Nurmi River. On the west, the 6th SS Division Nord formed up along the line of Lake Kuola and Lake Aapa. However, an undetected gap existed near Lake Nurmi in the north, and all the Soviets capable of reaching it fled for this point.

On August 24th, the clouds rolled back and the sun glowed out of a blue sky once again, bringing flights of Stuka dive-bombers and regular bombers to pound the encircled Russians. The Finns finally managed to close the trap on August 25th, after which the Finno-German forces defeated the remaining Soviets in the small pocket in detail. The fleeing Russians abandoned most of their tanks and artillery, including anti tank guns, and left 3,000 dead and 2,000 prisoners behind. This represented the most successful encirclement battle of Arctic Fox and prompted the Soviets to retreat some distance.



A picture of abandoned Soviet equipment

The Germans and Finns rolled forward to the Tuutsa River, where they discovered the Soviets had demolished all the road and railway bridges in the advancing forces' path. However, a group of 169th Division riflemen discovered an intact footbridge crossing the Tuutsa into the town of Allakurtti on

August 31st. The Germans immediately crossed it and established a small bridgehead in the town on the eastern bank.

The Soviets soon detected this incursion and counterattacked, but the German landers held out and reinforcements soon poured across the footbridge. After a series of sharp firefights, the Soviets retreated out of Allakurtti on September 1st, leaving the Germans with a foothold on the east bank of the Tuutsa.

After engineers restored the river crossings, the Finns and Germans crossed the Tuutsa, regrouped, and moved forward eastward. The next obstacle consisted of Soviet defenders dug in along the eastward route in the Lysaya and Voyta Hills, steep eminences offering good fields of fire to defenders and extremely difficult slopes to attackers. The Germans and Finns stormed the hills, using infantry with close artillery support from 88mm flak cannons and other direct fire guns. Nevertheless, the fight did not end until September 10th, as Waldemar Erfurth, liaison with the Finnish military, recorded: "The hilly ranges of the [Lysaya] (425 meters) and [Voyta] (411 meters) rise from the valley of the [Voyta] River, commanding the road and the railroad to Kandalaksha. The advance of the 169th Division came to a halt in front of the bunkers on these ranges. [...] [An] elongated lake protected the Russian flank. The Russian positions could, therefore, only be enveloped from the north, [...] The envelopment was planned on a large scale and brought complete success." (Erfurth, 2014, 32-33).

After this operation, the 169th was a spent force. Nevertheless, the Finns continued to push forward and reached the Verman River. As often at moments of military crisis, Hitler proved a vacillating commander. Fuhrer Directive No. 36, issued on September 22nd, urged the Arctic Fox units to pursue "the aim of at least cutting Murmansk off from its rail communications by the time winter sets in." (Boog, 1998, 948). However, just a week later, when Falkenhorst requested two fresh divisions to be committed to a final attack to the Murmansk railroad, the 163rd Infantry Division and the 6th Gebirgsjager Division (not to be confused with the 6th SS Gebirgs Division Nord), Hitler refused to release them. With these two divisions, the Germans could likely have punched through to the railway and severed this crucial link, cutting off a major Lend-Lease route and possibly collapsing the entire Murmansk defense due to lack of supplies and reinforcements.

Another factor entered the picture at this point. The Finnish president, Risto Ryti, received a threatening letter from the United States government regarding possible interference with Lend-Lease shipments. At this point, the Americans' supplies to the Soviets were delivered in a semi-covert manner, with manufacturing occurring in England using American money and plans. The message warned that "should material of war sent from the United States to Soviet Territory in the north by way of the Arctic Ocean be attacked en route either presumably or even allegedly from territory under Finnish control in the present state of opinion in the United States such an incident must be expected to bring about an instant crisis in relations between Finland and the United States." (Ziemke, 1960, 196).

President Ryti angrily rejected this message as high-handed coming from a government not yet formally at war with the Axis or Finland. However, due to political considerations, the Finns could no longer be seen leading the charge in Arctic Fox. Had Hitler supplied the two German divisions requested, the Finns would likely have supported a continued advance as long as the Germans spearheaded the offensive. Without these German troops, though, the Finns began digging in and standing on the defensive.



Ryti

While an alternative outcome will forever remain uncertain, Arctic Fox appeared to be on the brink of succeeding if the two requested divisions reached the front. Though late in the season, a determined attack would probably have carried all the way to the White Sea and placed the Murmansk railway in German hands. This stood a high chance of bringing about the fall of Murmansk, and would have broken the Soviet northern bastion which proved so troublesome on the German flank in the coming years. At this point in Arctic Fox, the Soviets had found themselves reduced to arming men from prisons to fight the Germans, a fairly strong sign of desperation.

Fortunately, as he did so often, Hitler shied away from delivering the final stroke during an offensive, apparently fearing to hazard the risks of a climactic battle. The Fuhrer's decision deflated Arctic Fox entirely; the Germans and Finns dug in, and the Murmansk railway remained permanently out of reach a

few dozen miles to the east, streaming with supplies, vehicles, and aircraft destined for the Red Army. With that, the promising operation ultimately ended meekly.



A picture of Feige awarding the Iron Cross to Finnish troops

Chapter 6: The Continuation War

Though the Finns fully intended to participate in Operation Silver Fox in order to retake the Karelian Isthmus (and possibly claim further lands in the north), they wanted to maintain their international reputation also. Accordingly, the Finns communicated to the OKH (Oberstkommando Heer, Supreme Command Army) headquarters through German liaison General Waldemar Erfurth that they “want to create the impression among their own people and people’s representatives of being drawn in by the course of events.” (Ziemke, 1960, 153).

Mannerheim and the other Finnish commanders need not have concerned themselves. The Soviets, realizing the inevitability of an attack by the Finns, tried a preemptive strike several days after the start of Operation Barbarossa. Though the Finns naturally portrayed this as completely unprovoked, in truth a number of German units occupied Finnish territory waiting to attack, while the Luftwaffe flew support missions for Platinum Fox and Arctic Fox out of Finnish airfields.

The Soviets, however, carried out their counterattacks in a way guaranteed to give the Finns propaganda ammunition. Soviet soldiers crossed the border into Finland, setting fire to frontier villages as they passed. Red Army artillery in Hango bombarded any Finnish installation or settlement within range, while Russian bombers struck a variety of targets in Finland. Some bomber squadrons attacked

Finnish warships anchored in the Turku skerries. Other, larger flights attacked many southern Finnish cities on June 25th, including Helsinki, Jonsuu, Heinola, and Turku, among others.

The nighttime raids of June 25th on urban targets finally presented the Finnish government with what they deemed a sufficient cause for war. The Finns officially declared war on the Soviet Union and the invasion could begin. The Soviets would provide further pretext by launching a shallow T-34 tank attack by part of the Red Army 21st Tank Division into Finnish territory on July 2nd, though they turned back after just two miles.

Regardless of their ultimate devolution into “trench warfare,” Operations Platinum Fox and Silver Fox provided excellent flank support for the large-scale Finnish operation in Karelia. This theater represented the first action of what the Finns named the Continuation War, due to their perception that it continued the Winter War that ended just 16 months prior to their participation in Barbarossa.

The Finns mustered 500,000 men for World War II, a startling achievement in light of their total population of 4 million people. Mannerheim committed 300,000 of these men to the initial attack of the Continuation War. The initial offensive moved off in the direction of Lake Ladoga, which Mannerheim later claimed as a Finnish idea. However, the evidence available – and logic – suggests that the Finns in fact wanted to take the Karelian Isthmus first, and only changed their target to the Lake Ladoga area at the insistence of the Germans. As General Hermann Hölter put it, “During the first consideration of operations by the Finns, the Karelian Isthmus was instinctively in the foreground of strategic wishes. The wish of the German High Command, however, that the Finns should make their principal thrust east of Lake Ladoga, in order to ‘join hands’ with the German Army Group on the Svir, led to the operations of the ‘Finnish Karelian Army’ under General Heinrichs through Ladogan Karelia to the Svir. (Lunde, 2011, 156).

Mannerheim’s delay of the start of offensive operations revealed itself as prudent almost immediately. The Soviets left full-strength defenses in place opposite the Finns for several days after the start of Operation Barbarossa. However, as the Finns remained quiescent, the Red Army succumbed to the temptation to strip away units for use to the south, in an effort to stem the powerful onrush of the main German offensive.

The Finns pounced on July 10th, when only nine Soviet divisions remained in place, giving the Scandinavian attackers a 3:1 advantage in numbers. The Finnish troops included bicycle troops, known as Jagers or hunters, who could move quickly along narrow tracks and forest trails even in the dense woodland. All units now enjoyed ample supplies of weapons thanks to German deliveries, and 105mm and 120mm guns. The invasion force even mustered seven platoons of Soviet and English tanks.

The bicycle-borne Jagers proved instrumental in the initial attack. Pedaling quickly along the sun-dappled tracks in the forests near Lake Ladoga, a brigade-strength unit of Jagers spearheaded the attack of VI Corps under Major General Paavo Juho Talvela. Lieutenant Colonel Väinö Merikallio, leader of the Jagers, recorded the first moments of the attack in a detailed journal found among his effects after his death later in the war: “21:40 hours, preparatory bombardment from our own artillery. This is a new experience for most of our men and impresses the Jäger greatly. [...] the enemy responds with increased ferocity. Mortar shells land in great clusters while the anti-tank guns firing tracer rounds create their own eerie illumination. [...] 22:15 hours, the bombardments shift step by step ever further [...] Suddenly wild cheering erupts from the right wing of the 4th Battalion. Men rise from behind the cover and rush straight at the enemy.” (Nenye, 2016, 81).



Talvela

The Finnish attack also made use of trucks to increase infantry mobility, along with the firepower of 200 3.7 cm PaK 36 antitank guns, which, though useless against T-34s, could still knock out the T-60 scout tanks and T-26 light infantry tanks which comprised most Soviet armor in the region. At one point, Merikallio's Jagers encountered a Soviet armored train which proved utterly impervious to their PaK 36 shells. However, the resourceful Finns spotted a large gasoline storage tank nearby and fired into this instead. With a river of flaming gasoline gushing downslope towards their train, the Soviets manning this powerful vehicle opted to retreat, steaming off along the track and leaving the Finns in possession of a key road and railway junction.



A picture of Finnish soldiers passing a destroyed Soviet tank

This thrust penetrated 65 miles into Soviet territory in just 6 days, and provided a jumping off point for an attack on Salmi on July 18th. The Soviets defended Salmi stubbornly, and the Finns did not dislodge them until July 21st. The Finns killed approximately 500 Russians and captured 100 more, while losing 50 WIA or KIA on their own side. Their prisoners informed them that more men would have surrendered but the commissars prevented them by shooting at least 30 men who wanted to yield.

In the meantime, the Finns cut off and encircled various Soviet units in their path, though in some areas the Red Army troops mustered tenacious resistance that the Finnish troops found themselves hard-put to overcome. The Finns formed small pockets which they called *motti*, rather than the larger encirclements or “cauldrons” (*kessel*) favored by the Germans. These tactical maneuvers proved much easier to execute in the rugged, tree-clad terrain, and they proved just as effective at crushing Soviet resistance.

On July 22nd, Talvela’s men located a boundary marker erected in the 1620s by the famous Swedish King Gustavus II Adolphus, known as the “Lion of the North” or the “Lion from Midnight.” Tavleva sent a triumphant message to Mannerheim after finding this 320 year old stone monument: “After the capture of Manssila today at 1130 hours, the Russians have been chased out of Finland in the operational area of the VI Corps. The area, whose rear boundary is formed by a line Korpiselkä–Jänis River, has been freed from our hereditary foe.” (Lunde, 2011, 161-162).

The Soviets, however, did not give up easily. Major General Dmitry Pavlov launched an amphibious attack on a pair of islets, Lukulansaari and Mantsi, near Salmi, using 15 ships to land a strong force of Soviet marines on the islands under cover of darkness. This placed the marines – “Striped Death” – in the Finns’ rear, at the same time that Soviet forces to the east launched a land counterattack in the direction of Salmi. This amphibious landing occurred on the night of July 25th-26th.



Pavlov

The Finnish 5th Division, whose artillery managed to sink four Soviet ships during the landings, attacked the marines, and a desperate battle ensued. Combat continued on the islands all day on July 26th, with both sides suffering heavy losses. Late in the evening on July 26th, the Finns managed to create three *mottis*, which they systematically wiped out, killing most of the Soviets and taking the rest prisoner.

Undaunted, Pavlov and his Soviet marines returned to the attack on July 27th. A large detachment of marines landed afresh on the island of Mantsi. This time, the Finns needed two days to smash the Soviet force and take its survivors prisoner. Once again, the Soviets fought with great courage and determination and inflicted many casualties, but the superior tactical skill of the Finns gave them eventual victory.

The Soviets made one more effort to land marines on Lukulansaari. However, this time, the Finns had prepared and simply destroyed the leading barges with concentrated artillery fire, causing the rest to turn back. A Finnish pilot passing over the next day described the scene from the air: “[The last] enemy landing attempt has been utterly smashed back, maybe 400–500 Russian corpses lie where they fell on the rocks and on the remains of their barges.” (Nenye, 2016, 95).

Elsewhere along the front the Finns also enjoyed considerable success and a rapid advance to their original national boundaries, though they proved reluctant to move beyond these. The mix of forest and lake created an unusual battlefield where quick improvisation could lead to victory or lessen the impact of a defeat. Erkki Raappana, commander of the Finnish 14th Division, led his men across the border against the Soviet 54th Rifle Division under Major General Ilya Panin. Raappana’s division first broke the Red Army defenses near Lake Kolvasjärvi, then carried out an amphibious crossing of Lake Lieksajärvi near Repola on July 11th to outflank the Soviet forces in their path.

From there, the 14th Division moved forward and managed to create a *motti*, trapping thousands of Soviets at Omelia as they were pinned against the shore of Lake Roukkulanjärvi. Stepan Tshurilov’s 337th Rifle Regiment represented the largest portion of the trapped units. As Raappana’s Finns

compressed the Omelia pocket, the trapped Soviets showed themselves nearly as resourceful as their enemies. The Red Army soldiers built hundreds of improvised rafts and struck out across the surface of Lake Roukkulanjärvi itself. Some of the rafts overturned, drowning approximately 100 men, but 2,170 Soviet troops managed to escape via this unusual route. This, together with the Finnish 14th Division's crossing of Lake Lieksajärvi for tactical advantage, shows the semi-amphibious nature of the warfare in this region of cold northern lakes.

In early August, Mannerheim began stonewalling the Germans' demands to launch fresh offensives to the east of Lake Ladoga. However, when the German OKH suggested attacking along the Karelian Isthmus towards Leningrad, the Marshal immediately assented. Of course, Mannerheim had no intention of assisting in the siege of Leningrad; the Finns wanted the Karelian Isthmus offensive and would play along if this secured approval for this maneuver from their difficult allies.

The Karelian Isthmus, between Lake Ladoga and the Gulf of Finland, featured extremely difficult terrain and few roads. Nevertheless, both sides made extensive use of light tanks and antitank guns during the fight for this important land bridge. Many individual actions occurred in which small numbers of men fought each other fiercely in the rough, forested, boggy terrain. In one instance, a young soldier of the Finnish 27th Infantry Regiment, Valho Rättö, won the Knight of the Mannerheim Cross award for extraordinary courage in dealing with a group of advancing Soviet T-26 light tanks. Rättö led a small party of men who found a damaged 45mm antitank gun abandoned by the Soviets along with a scattering of 45mm shells. Hastily cleaning the gun, the men rolled it forward through the underbrush to attack the T-26s. Since no sights remained, Rättö peered through the open breech to sight out the end of the antitank gun's barrel. Rättö and his ad hoc gun crew stalked the Soviet tanks in the dense woodland, pushing their gun from one position to the next and engaging the armored vehicles at ranges of 100 feet or less. Within half an hour Rättö's team had knocked out six T-26s, prompting the rest of the tank unit to retreat at full speed.

The Finns took Käkisalmi on the shore of Lake Ladoga on August 21st, securing this important town and prompting a counterattack by the Soviet 256th Rifle Division. The 256th met the Finnish 10th Division and suffered a crushing defeat at Räisälä. The Finns wounded 1,155 Soviets and killed 234 more, but the worst losses came when the panicking survivors tried to swim the Vuoksi River. The bitterly cold waters paralyzed men with cramps almost immediately, causing them to sink and drown. 4,830 Soviets died in the water, and a mere handful struggled out on the far shore to report the disaster.

With the Soviet forces decimated and reeling, the Finns drove forward aggressively in late August, using their tanks to break up any concentrated areas of resistance. The Finnish troops captured dozens of tanks intact along with hundreds of trucks, hundreds of artillery pieces, and vast stores of shells and ammunition. On August 29th, the Finns took the city of Viipuri after a hard fight against courageous Soviet resistance.

The Finns had swept most of the Karelian Isthmus by September 9th, the day on which Mannerheim halted the offensive. Leningrad's defenses lay just ahead and the Marshal had no intention of immolating his forces against the city's massive protective rings of bunkers, trenches, artillery positions, minefields, and barbed-wire entanglements. Naturally, Mannerheim did not wish to commit as deeply to the German cause as an attack on Leningrad would inevitably do. He wrote to his sister, "We have occupied a great part of the territory taken from us when peace was last concluded, and also added a fair piece of eastern Karelia. However, the fighting is incredibly hard [...] The Bolsheviks are fighting with an unbelievable

tenacity and bitterness on every front [...] joy for our victories is overshadowed by daily reports of killed and wounded.” (Clements, 2009, 264).

Despite German threats, blustering, promises, and wheedling, the Finns would go no further. On all fronts in September, they dug in and prepared to stand on the defensive, a posture that would continue until the end of the war. The shift of the political situation and the failure of Barbarossa to achieve victory in the first year brought the final element of Operation Silver Fox to a halt.



A map of the Finnish advance during 1941



A Finnish military parade in August 1941

Chapter 7: The Outcome of Operation Silver Fox

Operation Silver Fox failed for a number of reasons, most of them easily traceable back to Adolf Hitler himself. The entire plan, at Hitler's insistence, spread the available forces over a wide front rather than concentrating on a powerful *Schwerpunkt* to Murmansk. With all forces concentrated on one or two main objectives, a triumphant outcome might well have followed, but the invasion force had been considerably weakened by Hitler's obsessive strengthening of Norway's defenses, and its commanders later experienced considerable difficulty in securing reinforcements, often for the same reason.

The terrain presented another massive problem for the Germans. The tundra, a combination of rocky labyrinth and swamp, presented a major obstacle to the advance and rendered encircling movements impossible. Hitler assigned Gebirgsjäger units to the region due to a rather naïve belief that the cold conditions of the far north resembled those of the mountains. In fact, the swamps and swampy forests represented terrain for which the Jägers had no training, no matter how well they subsequently fought.

On top of that, a lack of a unified command prevented coordination between the different forces, and when Arctic Fox appeared to be on the verge of success, at least in cutting the Murmansk railway, Hitler ordered a halt. It was a characteristic choice made by the Fuhrer, who also stopped his panzers before they could crush the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk in 1940, halted the possibly war-winning advance on Moscow of Army Group Center in summer 1941, and called off the successful southern attack on the Kursk salient in 1943 at a potential moment of breakthrough.

One of Silver Fox's most baffling aspects lies in the actions of the Finns themselves. The Finnish government and to some extent the Finnish people wanted to regain the Karelian Isthmus. Furthermore, they also wanted East Karelia. However, once they physically occupied these areas, they stopped aiding the Germans in further advances, particularly against the key Murmansk railway. The flaw in this

strategy appears so glaringly obvious that the fact the Finns overlooked it nearly defies comprehension. The Finns could only keep the territories in question should the Germans destroy the Soviet Union or at least batter it sufficiently for Stalin to sue for peace. One factor, however, may have been the entry of the United States into war in December 1941; the Americans did, after all, send a message to the Finnish government through diplomatic channels calling on the Finns to avoid interrupting American Lend-Lease shipments through Murmansk. While the Finnish president answered this message with defiance before America's actual entry into the war, the U.S. declaration of war in December 1941 after Pearl Harbor may have tipped the scales decisively in favor of inaction as the lesser of two evils.

The polar front remained largely static for several years, with attacks and raids but no major offensives. The Germans termed the area the "ass of the world," and the men stationed there experienced frequent depression, sometimes profound enough to compel soldiers to commit suicide. Johann Voss described some of the conditions faced by the men of both sides in the northern winter: "On guard, [...] we were clad in felt boots, padded trousers, fur-lined anoraks, snow shirts, huge mittens, our heads protected by a woolen mask [...] looking like fat market women rather than young soldiers. Beyond such hardships, though, there were winter days and nights when this strange land presented itself in great glamor. I had already seen northern lights of immaculate beauty – a huge gleaming, dancing, wavering, and flickering of marvelous forms and colors – captivating us earthbound dwarfs and belittling our belligerent doings." (Voss, 2002, 87).

The Mountain Divisions eventually rotated out and ended up fighting gallantly but vainly in the wreck of defeated Germany in early 1945. Eventually, the Soviets launched a strong offensive into the region, aiming at the strategic Petsamo nickel mines, but the Germans defended this resource doggedly, yielding it only after a heavy struggle.

Meanwhile, the Finns turned on their erstwhile Wehrmacht allies and drove them out of Lapland in the Lapland War from September 1944 to April 1945. They then sued for peace with the Soviets and got relatively lenient terms in part through the intervention of President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill at the Yalta Conference in early 1945. Perhaps fittingly, it was the Finns who proved to be the most adroit of all in the Arctic.

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